

Testimony of Charles M. Nelson, Finance Chair, Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks  
In Support of  
House Bills 4677 and 4678/Senate Bills 388 and 389

We are at the cross roads for the future our 98 Michigan state parks and state recreation areas. Their 285,000 acres provide a tremendous array of recreation opportunity to residents and visitors. They are the habitat of many valued plant and animal species, common and rare. They host 22 million visits a year and generate more than \$650 million dollars annually in travel spending that ripples and multiplies through the economy, providing critical support for individual businesses, communities, regions and as a pillar of our state's vital tourism industry.

However this tremendous asset has been tarnished by gradual disinvestment. While no one sought to directly diminish park resources, facilities or services, the steep reduction (beginning in the late 1970s) of general fund dollars and the elimination of general fund altogether half a decade ago put tremendous strain on the system. It has fostered a "think for today, not for tomorrow" mentality. The DNR has been forced to use the proceeds from the 1994 voter approved State Park Endowment Fund for operations instead of infrastructure investment. Further, thousands of worker hours are spent on fee collection instead of maintenance, security, resource stewardship and interpretation, just to keep the system financially afloat.

The result is parks strained to the breaking point and beyond. The recent Warren Dunes State Park bridge washout and Ludington Interpretive Center collapse are prime examples. The result is also many things we don't see that also negatively impact the parks and our environment such as: aging septic and sewage facilities threaten surface water quality; ancient electrical and water systems can't meet the demands of modern camping equipment; access for those with disabilities compromised because appropriate facility renovations can't be paid for, etc. Finally, the 468 miles of roads in our Michigan State Parks currently get no funding from Michigan vehicle registrations or Michigan gasoline sales taxes.

It is against this background, that the statutorily created Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks (CCMSP) sought a more sustainable way to fund the state parks and their natural complements, the state forest recreation system and local parks. After reviewing funding approaches from across the country for more than two years, the best and most feasible idea came from Montana. It is disarmingly simple. Eliminate the motor vehicle permit for resident vehicles. In exchange, ask residents to VOLUNTARILY pay a smaller annual fee than the former state park motor vehicle permit annually when they register their vehicle. The idea is that if convenience for residents is increased, the fee is decreased, they are given a clear opportunity to directly support the park system as part of their everyday life and the state realizes management efficiencies that allow them to strengthen park services, more residents will be directly supportive of parks.

The result in Montana was and is positive and dramatic. Over the past 5 years, annually  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the vehicles registered in Montana pay the VOLUNTARY fee on top of their vehicle registration. Further, checks reveal that 90% of the vehicles entering parks have indeed paid the fee. This has translated to substantial infrastructure improvements, less of a focus on cashier duty and more on park management including cleaner bathrooms, less litter, more security, better resource management and new and innovative interpretive programs. Residents and visitors are giving the Montana state parks high marks for improving service, facilities and resource protection. HB 4677 and 4678/SB 388 and 389 are designed to do exactly this in Michigan plus provide additional funding for the other major public outdoor recreation opportunities, the state forest recreation system and local parks.

The choice is clear with these bills: the individual vehicle registrant truly gets a chance to vote yes or no for parks with their own money on an annual basis when they register their vehicle(s). If you are already a state park user, a fee reduction from \$24 to \$10 for each vehicle is a great deal and unusual in this day of constantly rising prices. If you are not currently a state park user, but support the state parks and other outdoor recreation venues and would like to start visiting state parks, this is an inexpensive way to start enjoying the exciting opportunities of Michigan state parks. As you know, no one is more than an hour away from a state park or recreation area anywhere in Michigan.

Every time Michigan voters have had a convenient, reasonable chance to say yes to state parks, grants for local parks and support the forest recreation system, they have resoundingly done so. This includes their support for the Clean Michigan Initiative, Proposal P for Parks, Proposal One to constitutionally protect funds such as the State Park Improvement Fund and multiple times to safeguard the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund. While some would like the days of a plentiful general fund to return and take care of these challenges, the CCMSP firmly believes that is not likely in the near future. If Michigan does not act decisively now, our treasured state park system may be irreparably damaged. The CCMSP strongly believes that these bills, which put much of the financial future of the parks directly in the hands of Michigan residents, are the best option for the sustainability of this park system that has helped make Michigan a great place to live, work and play for the past 90 years. The CCMSP looks forward to your support for this functional and innovative approach to strengthen Michigan's recreation, natural resource and economic future.

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